

Zimbabwe

Despite the country’s highly repressive regime, ONI found no evidence of Web site filtration in Zimbabwe. Limited Internet access and e-mail–focused usage have centered the country’s efforts to control the Internet on regulating email.



Background

Zimbabwe’s government is tightly controlled by President Robert Mugabe and the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF). They have dominated the political landscape since the country’s independence from Great Britain in 1980 and have manipulated political structures to ensure that they stay in control.¹ The ZANU-PF–controlled government is known for its brutal repression and continuing violations of human rights. The best example of this is 2005’s “Operation Murambatsvina,” or “Operation Tsunami,” as it is called locally.² Officially described as an effort to eliminate illegal housing and commerce, the “mass evictions and demolitions” were,³ as reported by the U.N., “carried out in an indiscriminant and unjustified manner, with indifference to human suffering,

and, in repeated cases, with disregard to several provisions of national and international legal frameworks.”⁴ Though the actual motivations are unknown, one theory is that the operation was meant to be retribution toward regions in which voters for opposition parties lived.⁵ Free assembly is dramatically curtailed as the government often violently breaks up peaceful protests under the Public Order and Security Act.⁶ There have been allegations of police abuse and the torture of detainees.⁷ A severe press law passed in 2002 allows the Media and Information Commission to crack down on dissent within the media by controlling the licensing of journalists.⁸ And, finally, the government jams a number of radio

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Filtering	No evidence of filtering	Suspected filtering	Selective filtering	Substantial filtering	Pervasive filtering
Political	●				
Social	●				
Conflict/security	●				
Internet tools	●				
Other factors	Low	Medium	High	Not applicable	
Transparency					●
Consistency					●

KEY INDICATORS



Source (by indicator): World Bank 2005, 2006a, 2006b; UNDP 2006; World Bank 2006c, 2006c; ITU 2006, 2005

stations critical of the government, such as Voice of America, Voice of the People, and SW Radio Africa.⁹

Internet in Zimbabwe

The number of Internet users in 2005 was reportedly 1,000,000, or approximately 8 percent of Zimbabwe's population.¹⁰ The number of Internet service providers (ISPs) has risen from six in 2003 to twenty-seven in 2004, due to growing demand.¹¹ The *Business Mirror* in 2005 performed a survey showing that Harare has over thirty Internet cafés, up from about twenty, two years prior.¹² The Internet is a less expensive means of communication than the telephone service in Zimbabwe, fueling its growth. In 2004, electronic messaging cost between ZIM \$200 (USD0.04 by 2004 exchange rate) and ZIM \$250 (USD0.05 by 2004 exchange rate) per minute, while international telephone calls cost between ZIM \$3,800 (USD0.72 by 2004 exchange rate) and ZIM \$5,800 (USD1.10 by 2004 exchange rate) per minute.¹³ However, because of limited awareness of its capabilities, Internet use is mostly limited to e-mail.¹⁴ The low level of Internet penetration overall is likely the result of the increasingly rapid decline of the economy and

quality of life in the country over the past seven years. In January 2007, inflation rates reached a staggering 1,593.6 percent.¹⁵ The government is bankrupt, eight in ten Zimbabweans are destitute, and workers in Harare see their bus fares to and from work take up their entire salaries.¹⁶ In such an environment, demand for luxury goods such as computers and Internet use is low. In September 2006, a large majority of the Internet went offline when the international satellite communications provider, Intelsat, cut service to the country, following the failure of government-owned telecommunications company, TelOne, to pay its debts to the company. Service was restored after the reserve bank paid the outstanding debt.¹⁷

Legal and regulatory frameworks

Zimbabwe's government mainly focuses its regulation of Internet use on e-mail.¹⁸ The Post and Telecommunications Act of 2000 allows the government to monitor e-mail usage and requires ISPs to supply information to government officials when requested.¹⁹ The Supreme Court, however, ruled in 2004 that the sections of the law that permit monitoring violated the constitution.²⁰

The government struck back with an initiative in 2004 that requires ISPs to renew contracts with TelOne, the government-owned telecommunications company, with the stipulation that they report any e-mail with “offensive or dangerous” content.²¹ In essence, this requires ISPs to do what the Supreme Court has ruled is unconstitutional. As of yet, no ISPs have signed new agreements.²²

The government responded again with the Interception of Communications Bill of 2006. Under its provisions, the government would establish a telecommunications agency called the Monitoring and Interception of Communications Center to monitor, among other things, all telecommunications.²³ The government withdrew the bill in November 2006 over constitutionality objections from the Parliamentary Legal Committee and plans to revise it.²⁴ Even without explicit powers, the authorities appear to be pursuing a crackdown on e-mail dissent unabated. In 2005, for example, authorities arrested forty people in a raid on a local Internet café because an e-mail insulting President Robert Mugabe allegedly was sent from the location.²⁵

ONI testing results

ONI testing of two Zimbabwean ISPs, Econet and YoAfrica, revealed no evidence of a filtration regime in the country. Though the ZANU-PF regime is very repressive, this is not an unexpected finding. Internet use in Zimbabwe is extremely low and, as mentioned earlier, is generally limited to e-mail rather than Web browsing. As a result, Zimbabwe’s main efforts toward control of the Internet are e-mail focused. A large-scale Internet filtration system in all likelihood does not hold much value to the Zimbabwean government relative to the price of its implementation.

Conclusion

Zimbabwe is a highly repressive country with a failing economy and a poverty-stricken population. Internet penetration is extremely low and the

Internet is mainly used for e-mail. As a result, the government restricts its efforts toward Internet control to e-mail monitoring and censorship. Though its legal authority to pursue such measures is contested, the government appears to be following through on its wishes to crack down on dissent via e-mail. If Internet usage were to rapidly expand and increasingly spill over to Web browsing, it is likely, given its history, that Zimbabwe would move to Web site filtration. Given the state of the country, however, this does not appear imminent.

NOTES

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